The Fridge

Growing up, our fridge was mostly empty. The light came on anyway. There was usually a jar of Chinese pickles from the Asian supermarket, pickled tofu still in its plastic tub, a carton of soy milk with the sell-by date underlined in Mum's sharp red pen, and some variation of Lao Gan Ma.

The unit sat at the end of a long driveway. After school, I checked the street first. One boy found out where I lived. He said it in class.

The class turned just enough. I could feel the shift in the room. Not pity. Not cruelty.

At home I was Dixin (pronounced *di-sin*). It was the name my grandparents chose.

At school, teachers paused.

"Dixon?"

I didn't correct them. At home, between the soy milk and Lao Gan Ma, I was still Dixin.

Breakfast became exact measurements. Weet-Bix counted. Congee portioned with the same spoon each morning. If I asked for seconds she shut the fridge with a soft thud. "Enough. We don't waste."

It rained often in Auckland. Not violently. Just steadily. I used to walk home because neither of them would come. I had stopped asking. One afternoon it rained harder than usual and I was already sick. My throat was raw. The water soaked through my blazer and into my socks before I reached the second intersection. By the time I got home my shoes squelched against the floorboards.

I stood in the hallway coughing while water pooled beneath my shoes. Mum said I shouldn't have walked in the rain and that it was my fault. She told me to close the door. No one knocked. I was hungry. I could feel it. The dull steady pull in my stomach. No one

checked. I could hear the fridge door open and close once. The cutlery drawer slid out. The sound of plates stacking.

When I got better she said I looked good. I was wearing gym tights. She looked at my legs for a second longer than usual. I had lost weight. My face looked smaller. She said it approvingly.

There was a jar of pickles from the Yemeni place on Atlantic. It was expensive. We were using my savings. I didn't want to buy it. He said he would love it. He didn't. It sat there sealed and sweating behind the glass.

Years later in Queens, my collarbone sharpened at first. Then my hips. I told myself it was gluten. I cut out bread. I cut out pasta. I cut out anything that felt heavy. My jeans hung loose again.

The fridge was full but nothing was finished. Takeout containers stacked and forgotten. The jar from Al Yemeni sweated behind the glass. I closed the door slowly so the light lingered.

In New York I kept buying toothbrushes.

The bristles were damp in the morning. The toothpaste dented from the middle instead of the end. I bought blue, then green, then white. I kept one in my bag. It ended up in the bathroom cup anyway.

“Did you use mine?”

“I don't remember.”

“It's wet.”

“You're overreacting.”

I stood at the sink holding the toothbrush.

At night he opened the fridge and stared inside without taking anything out. The light washed over his face. The door stayed open long enough for the motor to change pitch. Beer

cans multiplied. Yogurt expired untouched. The jar of pickles from Al Yemeni sat at the back, condensation gathering along the glass. I moved it forward so it looked deliberate.

Money thinned the way I did. I checked my balance in the grocery aisle and moved money between accounts before tapping my card. The jar went on the belt last. He said he couldn't wait to try it. He didn't.

Whenever I got angry, he cried.

Not immediately. First there was a pause. Then his face folded inward. His shoulders started to move.

"I'm trying," he'd say.

I would stop talking.

"I can't do this when you're like this."

I would lower my voice.

"You're scaring me."

The word violent came later.

"You don't see how aggressive you get."

We were standing in the kitchen when he said it. The fridge door was open. The light made his eyes look glassy.

I stopped moving.

I lowered my hands.

I tried to remember what I had done.

I went quiet.

When we first moved to Auckland, we lived in a block of flats. My mother had an affair with a boarder who rented the spare room. She told me he had erectile dysfunction, but I didn't understand it because I was 8. I understood before I had language for it that walls were thin. Privacy was temporary.

I met Lilian because of some cats in a nearby flat. She smelled like soap and oranges. Her house was quiet in a way that didn't feel tense. She took me to Sunday school. She let me sit at her kitchen table without earning it. I didn't have to anticipate correction there. When we moved again, she later went into hospice. I went to her funeral with my mother. I wrote in my diary that she saved me. My mother read it.

At thirteen, the diary felt like a room with a lock. When I found out she had read it, I shook. In the diary, I had called her a stupid bitch. It was private language. It wasn't meant for her. She said I was disrespectful. I said she shouldn't read what wasn't hers.

After that, I never wrote without imagining someone standing behind me. She would ask questions sideways. In the car, in the driveway.

I kept more than one diary. One of them was pink, with a small silver key, and she used to joke in front of her friends that I had one key but she had two. They would laugh, and I would sit still, understanding that my privacy was something negotiable, even amusing. I locked drawers. I tried to make my thoughts smaller on paper.

After that, I wrote knowing she would read it. I wrote that I hated her. I wrote it in jagged handwriting. The pages stopped being confessions and became messages. I stopped trusting my own sentences. For years after that, I wrote as if someone might be reading over my shoulder. Even alone, I edited myself before the ink dried.

I learned that silence could be entered without knocking. It felt like betrayal.

My jeans slid lower on my hips.

I stood in front of the mirror and turned sideways.

It felt good.

Whenever I raised my voice, even slightly, he cried. Sometimes he left the apartment and didn't answer his phone. Once he punched the door hard enough to split the wood near

the hinge. Another time he locked himself in the bathroom. I heard the tap running. When he came out there was blood on a towel.

“You pushed me there,” he said.

There was no one else in the apartment.

My phone stayed face down on the counter.

Sometimes I pushed back.

I shoved him once during an argument. The cats ran under the bed. Leo knocked into the wall on his way out.

The bowl was white. It had a small chip on the rim from before we moved in. We were arguing about something small — the rug, maybe, or where the suitcase had been left. I remember the sound of my voice more than the words. His was steady in a way that felt deliberate.

He said, “See? You’re violent.”

I slapped him once. Hard enough to leave a mark. Another time I threw a book at his face. It struck his eye. I scratched his back. I pulled his hair. He pulled mine. I kicked the bedroom door open when he locked himself inside.

When I hit him, it felt good. For a second, the feeling wasn’t only mine.

Afterward, I said it was escalation. That I was reacting. That I had been pushed there.

It was still my hand.

I held them still against the counter.

I wanted them to look harmless.

He was yelling. I was yelling back. It felt rehearsed.

Inside, I was somewhere else.

I could see his mouth moving. I could hear my own voice rising. But it didn’t feel connected to me.

The cats disappeared under the bed.

My mother used to call me violent too.

She stepped toward me once and I bit her hand. I remember the heat of it, the taste of skin, the shock of it. My father stood up from the table and then stepped into the hallway. He didn't look at either of us. Later, when I went to him, he said, "You two sort it out."

I could hear my heart in my ears.

Afterward I apologised.

It became efficient. He cried. I apologised. He said he was broken. I told him he wasn't. By the end of the conversation I wasn't sure what we had started arguing about.

My breath made small clouds in the air. I called friends back home in different time zones. I described the apartment. The arguments. The toothbrush. I asked what they thought I should do.

When he said he might kill himself, I didn't feel panic.

I felt recognition.

I was ten the first time someone told me they wanted to die.

St Lukes carpark. Engine off. Windows up.

"I don't want to live like this," my mother said. I leaned toward her. "You have me," I said.

Years later, in a kitchen in Queens, when he said he might kill himself, I recognised it immediately.

I felt assigned.

No one had told me that wasn't my job.

The first time, I stayed on the line. I lowered my voice. I told him to breathe.

The second time, I leaned against the kitchen counter. The fridge was open. Cold air on my legs.

The third time, I ended the call.

The next day he asked why I had left him alone.

I was standing at the sink. Water running. I said, “Why aren’t you dead?”

My voice didn’t shake.

There was silence on the line. Not relief. Not fear. Just space.

One night he cut himself deeper than before.

There was more blood than I expected. It soaked through the towel and onto the bathroom floor. I called an ambulance.

They kept him overnight.

The emergency room in Bushwick was loud. Fluorescent lights. Plastic chairs. A television mounted high in the corner with the sound off.

They wrapped his arm.

A nurse leaned over the bed when she spoke to him. Her hand rested on his forearm longer than it needed to. She smiled when he joked. Another nurse asked me what had happened.

He said it was a misunderstanding.

The doctor spoke into the space between us.

“You can’t let this escalate,” he said.

No one asked me anything directly.

I could see my reflection in the metal rail of the hospital bed. Pale. Smaller than I remembered. My coat still smelled faintly of cigarette smoke from outside the apartment.

When I got back to the apartment, I packed.

I folded my clothes into the suitcase. I booked a flight home. I left the suitcase by the door.

The hospital called in the morning. He wanted to speak to me.

He sounded small. Tired.

I unpacked.

When we returned to the apartment, I opened the suitcase.

I put everything back exactly where it had been before.

The apartment looked exactly the same.

The jar from Al Yemeni sat sweating in the back.

The suitcase was empty.

That felt worse.

I came back to Gladesville with one suitcase and no plan.

Lee opened the door before I knocked. Warren stood behind her, barefoot, holding a dish towel.

I had met them because I was giving my dog away before I left for New York. I couldn't take him with me. They said they would keep him. They sent photos sometimes.

When I came back, they let me stay.

The flat at the back of the house had once been a storage space. Now it was mine. A bed against one wall. Sliding doors that opened toward the pool.

That first night Lee made meatloaf.

She kept the recipe on a folded index card, yellow at the creases. She smoothed it flat against the counter before reading it, then folded it again when she was done.

The meatloaf was dense and slightly sweet. The edges were crisp. She cut it into thick slices.

I ate three.

The next morning I ate it cold from the fridge. And again that night.

My jeans hung loose at the waist. When I crossed my legs my knees knocked together. I could feel the wooden chair through my hips. My collarbones rose sharply when I

reached for the salt. Lee passed the gravy without looking at my plate. No one was measuring me.

No one commented.

“Eat,” Lee said once, not looking at me.

I apologised for the second, then third slice.

Warren looked up from his plate.

“You don’t have to apologise for being here,” he said.

The fridge in their kitchen was full in a way that felt deliberate. Yogurt. Butter. Containers labelled in black marker. Milk that wasn’t underlined. Fruit that hadn’t softened into itself.

I opened it to make sure it was still full.

Sometimes to check it was still real.

Lee noticed.

“Take whatever you want,” she said.

I apologised anyway.

For the wine.

For taking up space at the table.

The house was quiet in a different way than Queens had been. No sirens. No footsteps overhead. No door slamming at two in the morning.

Waffles learned the routine quickly.

In the mornings he scratched at the glass until I let him in. He walked through the room like he owned it, sniffed my suitcase, jumped onto the bed.

He didn’t hesitate.

He didn’t ask what happened.

He just stayed.

Warren wore navy speedos like it was still summer. Lee told him to put on shorts. He didn't.

Warren would laugh. "Where were we?"

The house stayed steady.

Warren hugged me differently than anyone else ever had. Firm. Two arms. No hesitation.

One night, when I apologised again for something small, he said, "If your wings grow, you're allowed to leave us too."

I stopped.

A tear rose and didn't fall.

It wasn't possession.

It wasn't guilt.

It was permission.

Valentine's Day, Lee left a card on the kitchen counter.

It was addressed in her handwriting. Inside, she wrote that it was from Waffles. A small paw print drawn in pen signed the bottom.

I didn't open it in the house.

I put it in my bag.

Later, in the carpark of the shopping centre before my dentist appointment, I sat in the driver's seat and read it.

The windows were up. The engine was off.

It said I was loved.

My eyes burned. I wiped them before going inside.

That night I ate meatloaf again.

Waffles lay under the table and waited for scraps. I sneaked him the edges, as did everybody else.

The fridge in the back flat hummed steadily.

Everything had a place.

I closed the door gently.